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Color Woodcuts & Ancient Greek Poetry

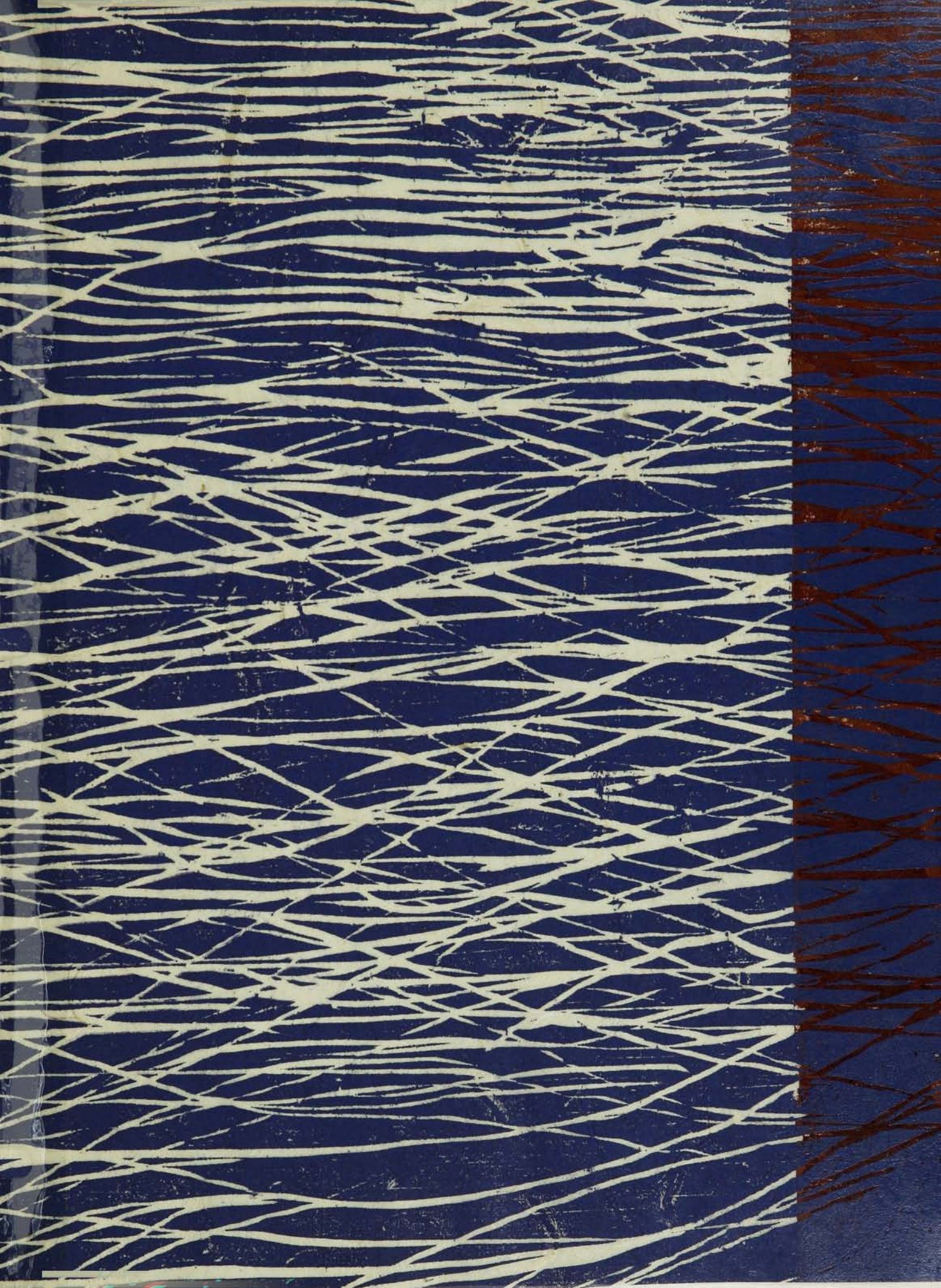
Catherine Croom

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COLOR WOODCUTS

&

ANCIENT GREEK POETRY

Catherine D. Croom

Rochester Institute of Technology

May, 1968.

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I would like to thank the following people:

My advisor Miss. Wells for her constant
enthusiasm and encouragement; Mr. Provan
for his help selecting type and printing
the poems; My father for taking the pic-
tures; and Ken Chin for being my most
demanding critic.

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I am concerned with illustration as a fine art and a personal statement. Most of my attempts to translate a poem or story into pictures showing "what is happening" have been disappointing and I have come to feel that illustration should not be too attached to what is literary. It should be a **visual** statement.

I became interested in woodcuts a year ago when I did them for the first time. The closeness to sculpture, the physical involvement in freely handled carving excited me. I felt an immediacy in woodcut that I did not feel with other printmaking techniques. I could do them rapidly. With color woodcuts especially I found freedom of expression. The blocks could be moved around or partially printed. Colors could be changed and the resulting prints from one set of blocks could be amazingly different.

As to the poems: I first saw this collection (POEMS FROM THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY by Dudley Fitts) several years ago and was surprised and impressed by it then; the ancient Greeks were so human!

These two inspiring (to me) ideas then; the woodcut and the Greek poetry are the basis of my work.

My original idea was to make powerful visual symbols; not exactly illustrating the poem but representing their mood, their color, shape and line. Hopefully my subjective interpretations would have meaning for others too. (It was suggested by the committee that I work on a large scale to achieve the power I wanted.)

PROCEDURAL MATTERS: A Time Table

I did more thinking at first than I did doing. I started some drawings a few weeks before school and I continued sketching and scraping for several weeks into the first quarter until my advisor reminded me that I was supposed to be doing woodcuts.

The first print was made late in October and from then on I worked fairly steadily doing all my chopping at home; using school time (once a week for three hours) for printing only.

I had ideas for 14 prints; 11 were successfully evolved.

Time spent on sketching after my first binge has been negligent. I found that too much preliminary work has been unnecessary as long as I had some kind of an idea, clear or otherwise. Carving went rapidly and I spent the most time selecting paper, colors and inks; working with each set of blocks until I achieved one satisfactory print.

Any record of time spent on each individual poem would vary greatly from poem to poem because each idea presented itself to me differently. This will become clear in the latter sections of my report.

PROCEDURAL MATTERS: A History Of The Project

First Epitaph; Father For His Two Sons

The youth of the boys and their innocence gave me the idea of drawing them underground, in a fetal-like position. I made several detailed pencil drawings from photographs of fetuses. This gave me an idea of the correct position and was helpful in giving more meaning to the final sketch which was simplified and abstracted. I decided to make the figures tube-like, a part of the root system which would surround them.

Several sketches preceded the final idea. They are all concerned with comparing the dead boys to the life above them as symbolized by a single tree or leaf pattern. I also thought of superimposing leaves as a linear pattern carved on a separate block over the figures. The linear possibilities led me to more sketches of roots and bone structures intertwining.

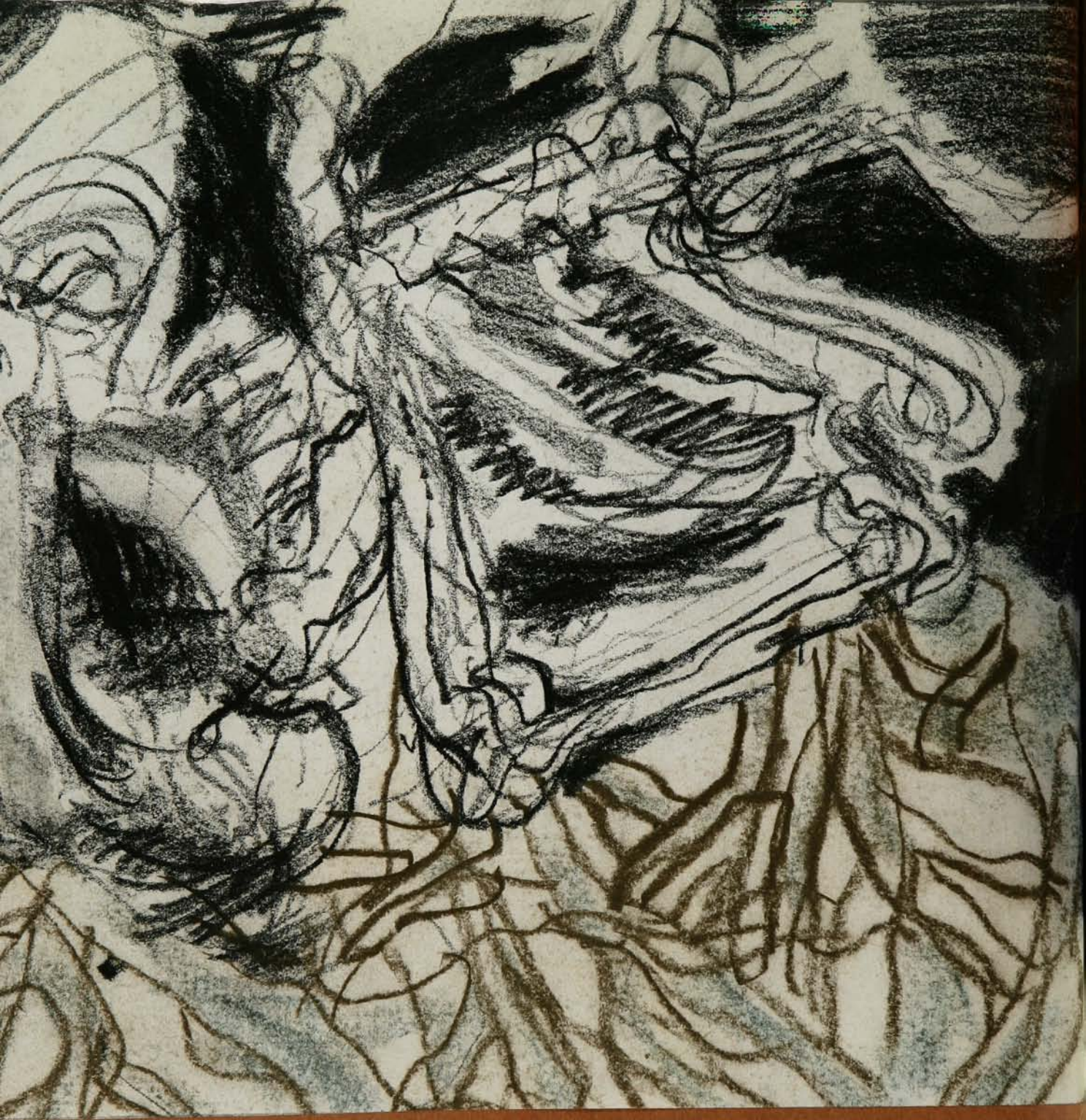
The final sketch is a collage of several drawings cut up, pasted and redrawn until it was satisfactory to me.

The carving was freely done on three separate blocks which I combined during printing in several ways more or less complex depending upon the number of layers.

I found that too much pre-planning when I was arranging the blocks to be printed was unsatisfactory. It was better to be intuitive about this and let the evolving and unpredictable print itself dictate color and order to me rather than vice versa.

The proof I have included is one of the pre-planned almost successful ones. It lacks the variety of richness, I think, of my final print. (which was made more intuitively).









The Vine And The Goat

The second poem which intrigued me was one concerning a goat and a grape vine. The goat eats the vine (Gnaws it down to the ground") and yet the vine is enduring. It addresses the goat saying "I will make libation at your sacrifice".

I thought about an abstract interpretation for this one; ie; one of two great forces struggling to finally overcome the other... but I settled on a more literal solution: to show a vine and a goat. The vine would be somehow under around and through the goat.

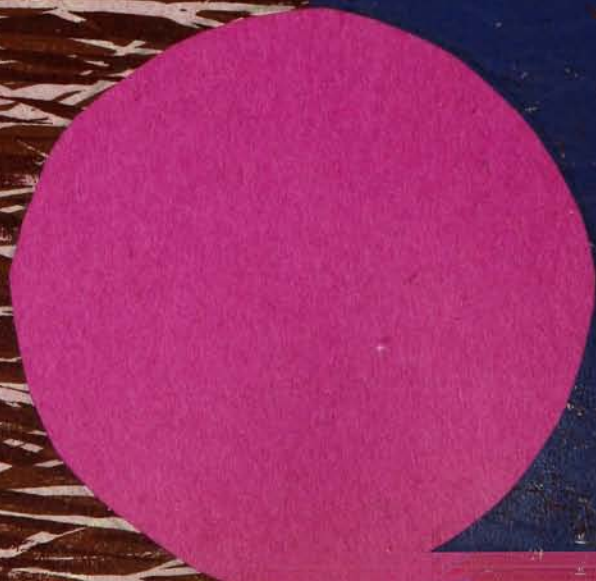
Obviously the problem could have been solved through superimposition but this solution seemed vague to me and I wanted to avoid relying on it. (Of course all woodcuts done with two or more blocks necessitate a "superimposition" when they are printed. The final print is built out of many or few layers of color superimposed one after the other. In using the term above I meant to imply a more accidental happening. This happens when two or more blocks are carved without pre-planning, without exact regard for the forms which have already been carved into another block. The blocks are therefore merely superimposed during printing. You never know what you will get and you are not hampered with having to create a sequential structure of recognizable form.)

I got my goat from a Picasso sculpture; the vine was more trouble. My sketches show several solutions.

I made a small goat stamp, intending to repeat the form as Steinberg does and maybe as a last resort to superimpose it over a tangle of vines.

The vines themselves are simply carved on both sides of one long block and printed so that one inking overlaps the others in a banner effect. The goat stamp, my second attempt (the first was not goat-like enough) is printed in a row under the flag of vines. I am pleased with it because it looks like it's in motion, a perpetual eating machine.





Stargazing

The solution to this poem started out logically enough.

I was going to carve the first sketch in the following series. At the same time I was working on another epitaph block. It was rather large and because I was unsure of the forms, it's a little overcarved. When it was finished it didn't look like an epitaph, it was too freely done, more like a nighttime sky. The forms were airy and unearthly. Two vague figures emerged in one lower corner, looking and pointing upwards. I decided to use the block to illustrate a poem by an astronomer. It was a much more "magnificent" solution than the one I'd intended and probably more expressive of the poem itself. The forms are not literally like the stars and outer space but I find something in them of heavenly mystery. The whole thing was accidental.





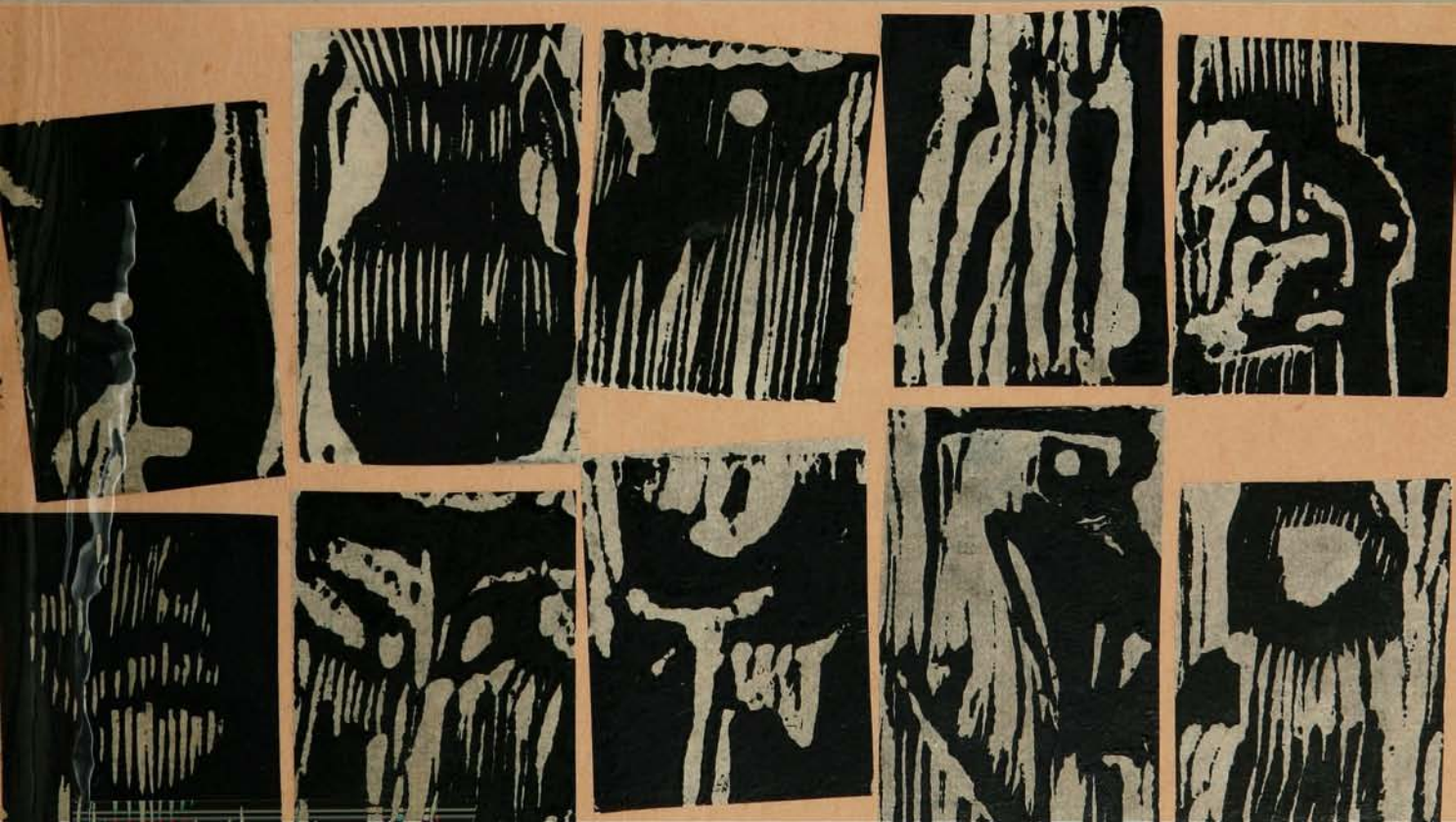




Troy

I made a print from a piece of 2x4 pine burnt enough to etch the surface slightly. The light charcoal shapes resulting were lovely; soft, modulated and misty.

I thought of applying this idea to the poem about the end of the city of Troy; of carving a long narrow block of sacred cows and ten small blocks to be used as pure abstract forms, some of them reminiscent of artifacts, vases, faces, etc. All the blocks were to be printed (in many colors) on the back of the print I'd made, behind the charcoal. I hoped to retain the subtlety of my original print in this manner. The first print was, however too vague. The small blocks were barely visible. Finally after many flops (I also had some difficulty getting another piece of wood to burn as nicely as the first.) I solved the problem by printing my carved blocks first and then rubbing the charcoal impression over this (instead of vice versa.)







I found that I was gradually becoming more aware of the effects of different colors and papers beginning with the Old Man Epitaph.

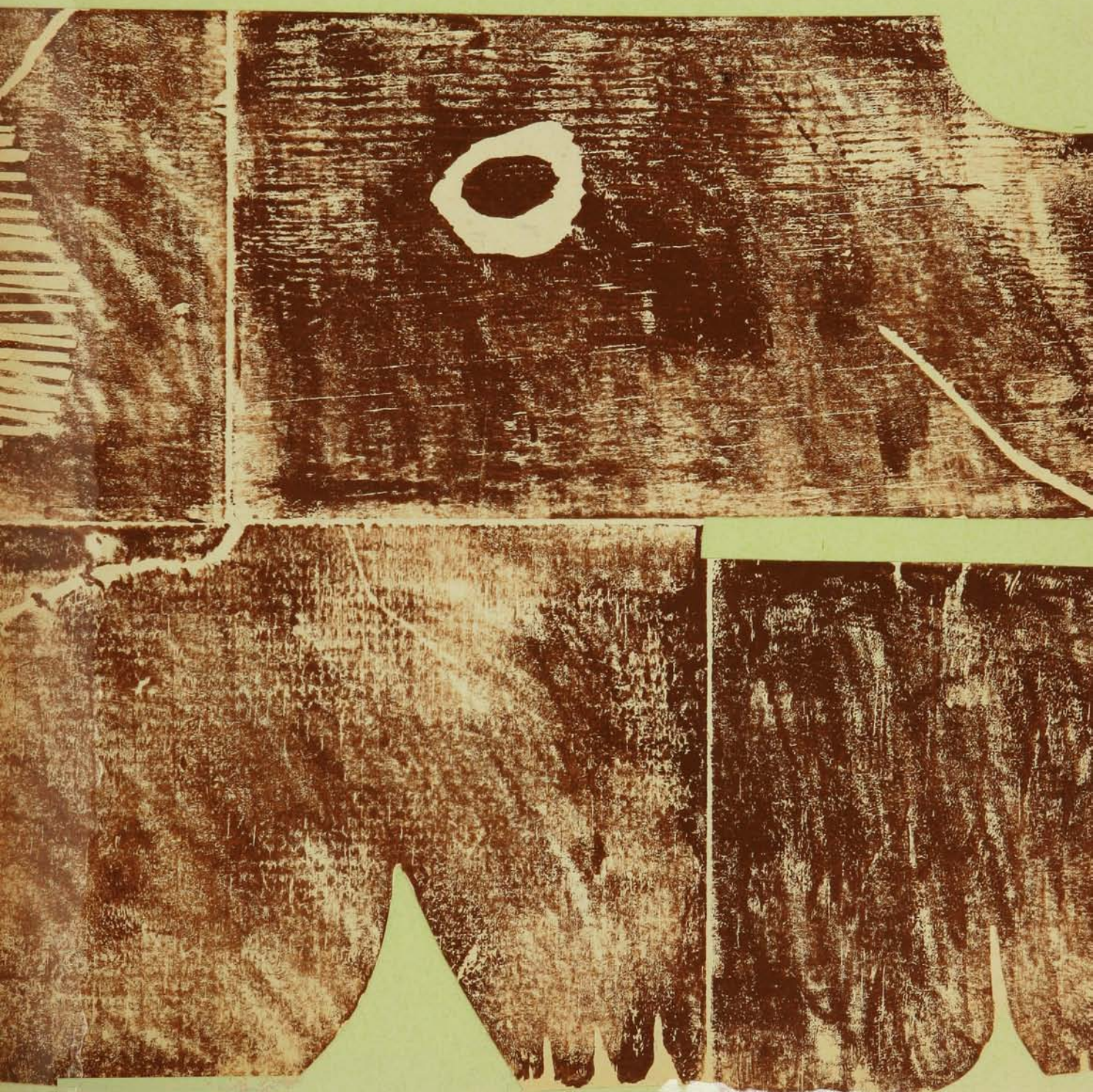
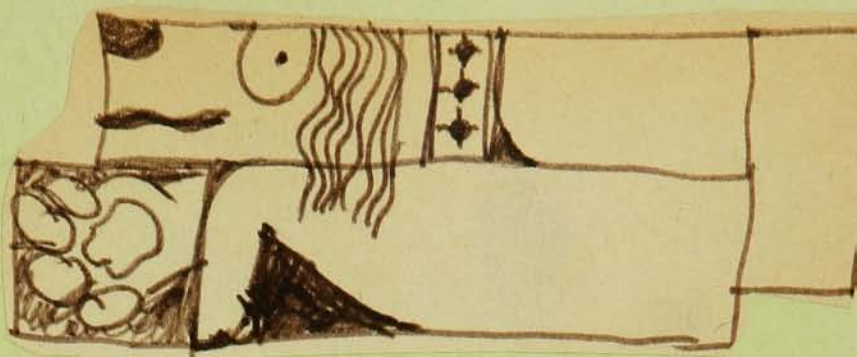
I was almost ready to sacrifice form in some of the ensuing prints and to concentrate on color alone and if I am weak in some of these prints it is because of this concentration on color rather than form. Or maybe it is because of the compromise I made between illustrative illustration and lovely freeform colors.

Bully Boy

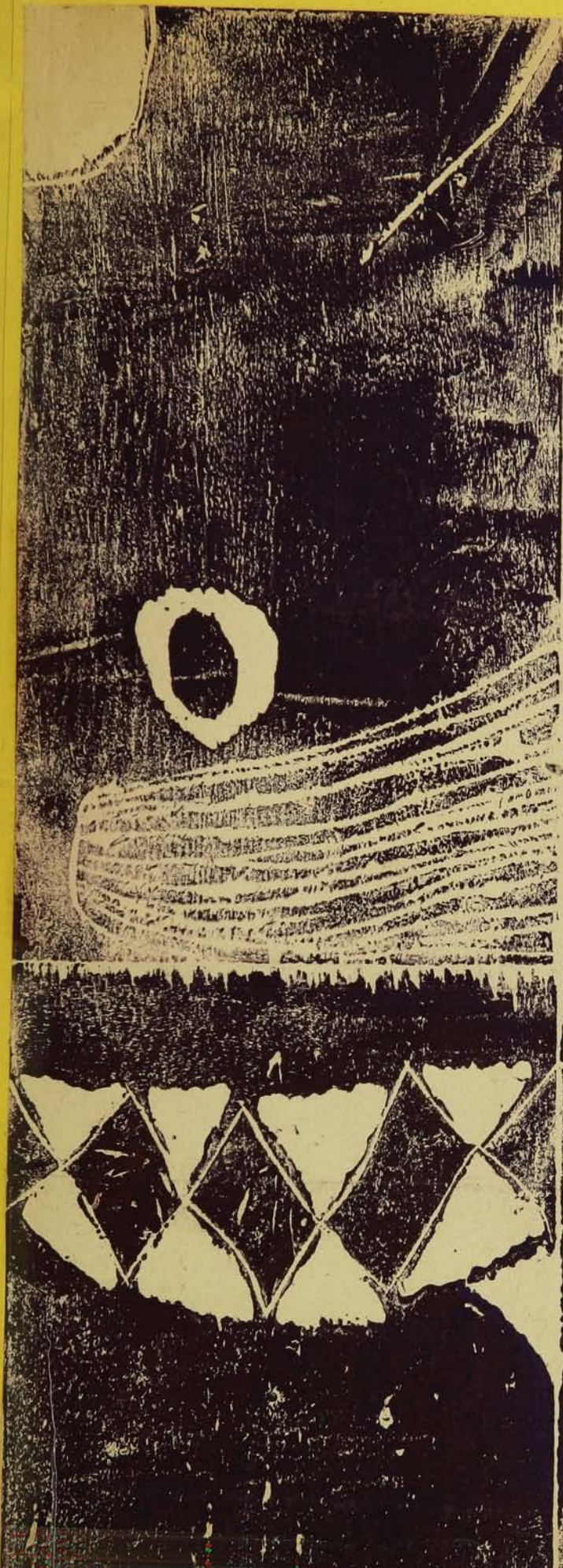
This print is an exception to the above; it is black and white.

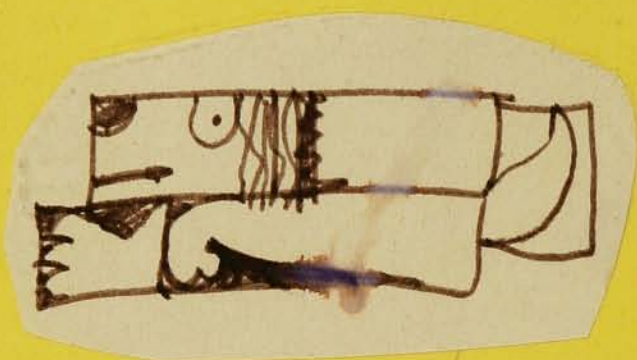
I felt like carving a little animal and luckily there were several poems applicable: one about rabbits and two about dogs. I had several small blocks of wood which fitted together in a way that reminded me of a little dog and I decided to do the epitaph about Bully Boy. I wanted to limit the carving as much as possible; letting the block shapes themselves dictate as much of the meaning as possible. The idea was to imitate stone carving as it would be on a tombstone. Bully Boy evolved through many sketches- simple, decorative, two dimensional, cute and something special because of the one pathetic paw. At first I was going to use a small block above Bully Boy and carve a semi-circle of stars glorifying his initials; B.B. I expanded this idea by making a whole tombstone based on early New England tombstones. I tried to create the effect of a stone-carved V-shaped line and its shadow by making double lines in the wood. The poem itself is carved into the block as it would be on a real tombstone.

Except for the lettering all the lines are black on white: the angel skull is positive; the black lines have been left uncut. Bully Boy is negative (or "indirect" maybe): he is printed white on black and the lines themselves are cut out letting the black background show through. The effect of white on black is really stunning.









Valentine

I used a combination of small blocks again in this print.

It began as a new way to overlap different color blocks. The blocks are stacked as a pyramid: each ascending block is placed in the center of the one below and is smaller than it. The center of each block, an area the same size as the one above, is left an uncut rectangle. The top block is entirely carved. Thus there results a flat color plane as a background under each carved block and there are no white spaces.

The intension with this poem was to create something more colorful and less literal than Bully Boy. The poem is light; the illustration would have to be humorous too.

I did several sketches of a face with the features rearranged until I arrived at the one shown. Several cuttings were necessary for each layer. During the printing I experimented with papers of varying absorbency: thin shiny rice paper did not accept more than two layers of ink, the soft webby paper was just the opposite; too absorbent. The effect was rich but unclear. I settled on an artificial rice paper of medium absorbency and the resulting print was fairly successful. I was slightly unhappy with it though and I did another the next week on 3M paper (similar to fiberglass cloth) which combines many more layers of color and is much softer and more colorful.







The Drunk

This poem at first suggested an abstract solution; all are drunk but one and therefore he is the only one who seems to be drunk. I thought of doing a wild chaotic block with one stable element in the center. I transformed this in a figurative design however. The preliminary drawing was rapidly carved and developed through the stages of which I have a record in the following series of proofs.

The reason for the addition to the cow-like body which is out side the main block was partly to draw attention to the seeming stupidity and isolation of Akindynos, and also the shape sizes in the main block are too similar.









Spring

The idea for this one came easily: a circle (representing the sun perhaps) made up of many small blocks fitted together so that the grain of each block would run in a different direction.

I made only one sketch; full size; the forms were easily determined and unimportant. The effect would be almost purely overlapping linear color achieved through rotation of the circle and color changes each time it was printed. I made no proofs; the two prints I have are the only two. Both are slightly unsatisfactory: the yellow one has good color but it was not rotated in a regular sequence and is graphically a little weak; the green was rotated in a sequence, however its color is not as pleasing to me - so I have included both in one matte.

The ... And The House

I ... to ...

print.

This was to be it: But because of the ...

decided half ... through the ...

Once again I wanted to ...

shape of the board ...

up ...

The ... went ...

during printing. I used ...

first but these colors were ...

The colors I ...

much more successful ...

not altogether satisfied with ...

enough.





The Miser And The Mouse

I wanted to finish my project with a huge ten color print. This was to be it: But because of the simplicity of the design I decided half-way through that four colors would be sufficient.

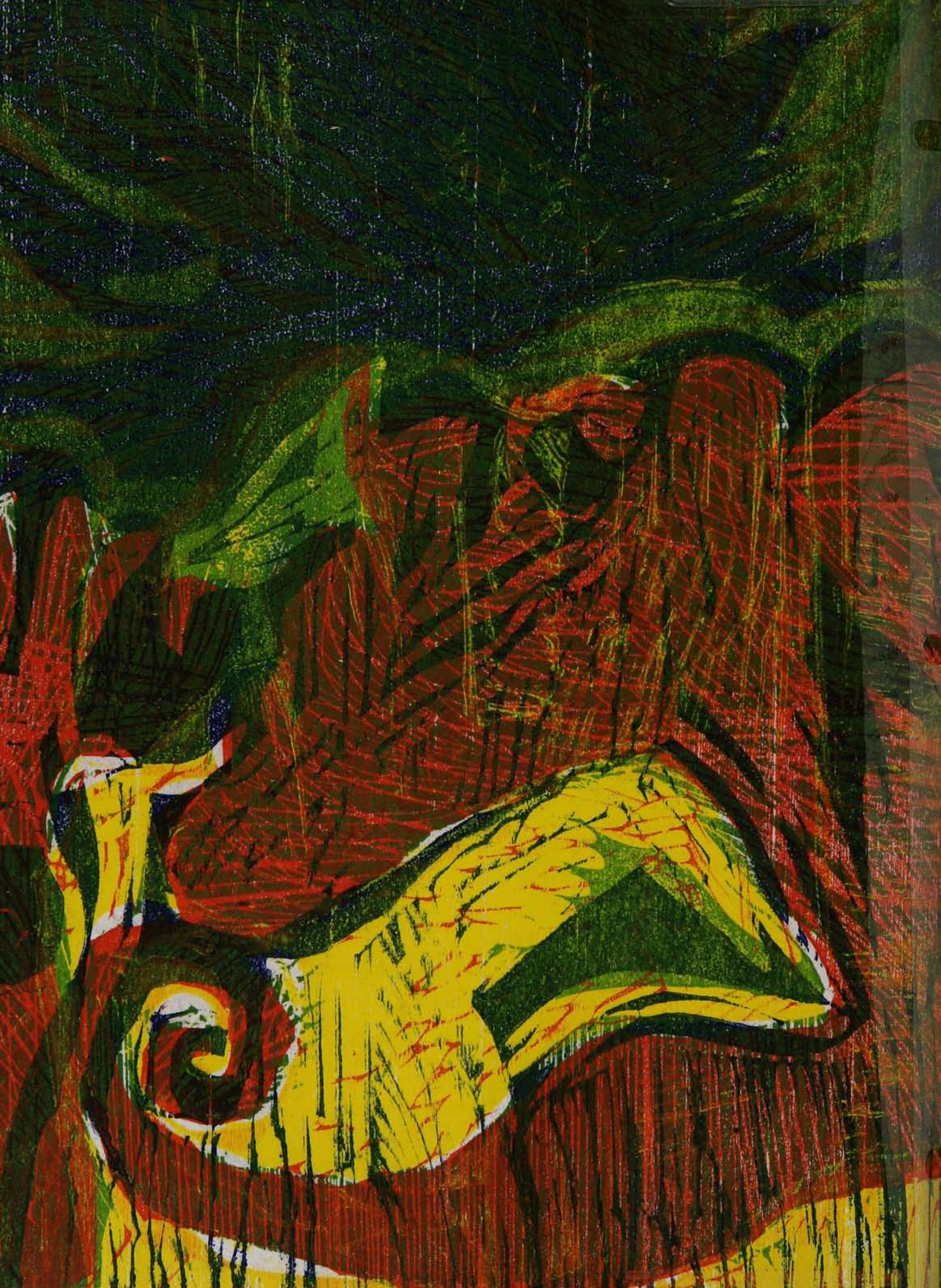
Once again I wanted to cut as little as possible and to let the shape of the board itself tell me what to do. The Miser takes up almost all the room. He is squeezed squarely into three corners allowing the mouse only a tiny fraction of his space. This concept of course represents what the poem is all about.

I discovered a new technique while I was carving this one: scratching the surface by pulling the knife toward me instead of pushing it into the wood as I had been doing. The effect is mainly textural.

The Miser went through many unsuccessful changes of color during printing. I used mostly pure red, green, blue, and yellow at first but these colors were so intense that they did not blend well.

The colors I ended up with are fairy tale and intuitive and much more successful I think. The black mouse is a nice detail. I am not altogether satisfied with the design. The forms are not clear enough.



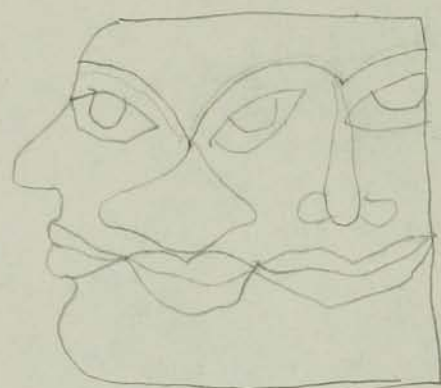


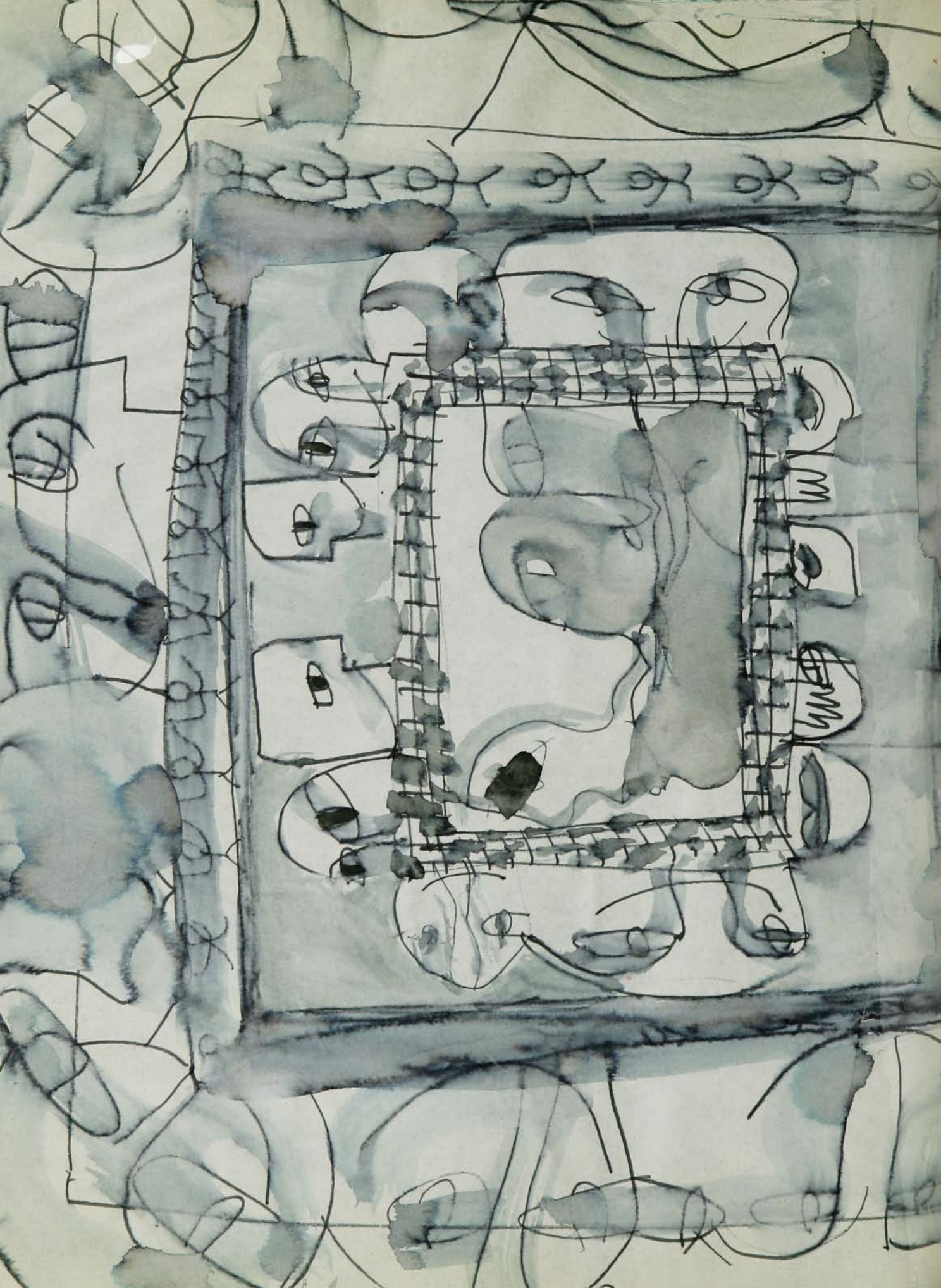
Telling A Man What You Think

This print was accidental. I had intended to include only ten. It is derived from a doodle; a composite head showing two front views and a profile. The head expresses a feeling of contentment. I applied it to a poem about how nice it is to tell people exactly what you think of them.

I have included several sketches; smiling heads and abstract figures holding hands each within a border. (This print has the formal structure of a border which I find myself using more and more frequently).

The idea behind the printing was to make a background of many colors, each color corresponding to a border area on the carved board. Then to print the carved block over these stripes in a solid black or dark blue so that they would show very little. Several unsuccessful proofs were made (the stripes were too hard edged and bright). The final print is done on very absorbent paper and the under colors are softer and more blended. The total effect to me is very tapestry-like. This I feel is one of my most successful prints.





PROCEDURAL MATTERS: A Few Failures

I did several blocks which either did not evolve at all or were unsatisfactory when they did.

The fault with one was that I tried too intellectually and not intuitively enough to squeeze it into being an illustration. It was not really related to any of the poems and I could not force it in any direction. The block was based on a poem about man's fate which I tried to symbolize with a butterfly: a merely convenient graphic shape, something decorative and nice to carve. The second block for this print was a silhouette; a man shape which would not be assimilated into the butterfly. I finally gave the whole thing up as a half-way idea.

Another was done from a shaped block, based on a good drawing and a good idea; but it was overcarved and no amount of overprinting could remedy it. Two men a talking of love, foolishly as I tried to show. I printed this one in black, then in black with a little yellow mixed in to create a sickly green. The plain black was better as it drew more attention to the graphic shape. The block was printed somewhat as an intaglio would be. I rolled the ink down into all the cracks as an attempt to cover up the overdone carving. I have included a photograph of this print although I am still not particularly satisfied with it.

The third failure was not really a failure because it was never really printed. It was to be like an eskimo stone cut; two colors on one carved surface. The design however was too intricate for this type of printing.

Lift sunward yr considerable nose,
fling wide the abyss
of yr mouth,
And you'll make a presentable sun-dial
for all who pass by.

THE EMPEROR TRAJAN





CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

The poems were set in the printing department. I used a mono-type letter style: Deepdene; 24 picas high.

The prints and poems were then matted on thin-ply Bristol Board which is flexible and thereby serves a double purpose: a) to lessen the weight of the final book and b) to make it more book-like with pages that bend.

The white linen covering for the book was printed from a design done on a linoleum block. (The design represents figures dancing in a circle; a celebration of the poems.)

The finished book is 28 5/8" x 41 1/8" to accomodate my largest print.

In conclusion, I am satisfied with what I have done insofar as it is a beginning. I feel that I have just begun to discover woodcut.



EPITAPH

THE VINE AND THE GOAT

EUNOS OF ASKALON

STAR-GAZING

PTOLEMAIOS THE ASTRONOMER

ON TROY FALLEN

But the name of Troy
And the glory of Troy shall live to see these die.

AGATHIAS

HIS EPITAPH

Quietly 0 Stranger pass by:

here sleeps an old man
Cradled with the holy dead in the common silence . . .

MELEAGROS

EPITAPH OF A MALTESE WATCH-DOG

Beneath me (says the stone) lies the white dod
from Melita,

The faithful sentinel of Eumelos' house:

living,
His name was Bully Boy; but now, in death,
His barking is hushed in the empty ways of night.

TYMNES

A VALENTINE FOR A LADY

Darling, at the Beautician's you buy

Your (a) hair
(b) complexion
(c) lips
(d) dimples &
(e) teeth.

For a like amount you could just as well buy a face.

LUCILIUS

ON SOBER AKINDYNOS

We were all drunk but Akindynos
And so Akindynos
Seemed the only drunk among us all.

LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA

PRIAPOS OF THE HARBOR

Now Spring returning beckons the little boats
Once more to dance on the waters: the grey storms
Are gone that scourged the sea. Now swallows build
Their round nests in the rafters, and all the fields
Are bright with laughing green.

Come then, my sailors:
 Loose your dripping hawsers, from their deep-sunk
 graves
 Haul up your anchors, raise your brave new sails.

It is Priapos warns you, god of this harbor.

ANTIPATER OF SIDON

THE MISER AND THE MOUSE

Asklepiades the miser, chancing one morning to
meet
A mouse in his house, addressed it: "My very dear
Mouse,
Why are you here?"
To whom, with the sweetest smile,
The mouse made courteous answer: "My frugal
friend,
Take heart! I expect no board from you:
only a bed.

LUCILIUS

MEDITATION

Praise of course, is best: plain speech breeds hate.
But ah the Attic honey
Of telling a man exactly what you think of him!

PALLADAS

DIALOGUE

A: Why that alarming sigh? B: I'm in love.
A: With a boy or a girl? B: With a girl.
A: Attractive? B: I think so!
A: Where did you meet her?
B: Last night at a dinner-party.
A: I see. And you think you've a chance with her?
B: I'm sure of it; but
It's got to be kept a secret, friend.
A: Ah. Then you mean
That you are not contemplating Holy
Matrimony?
B: That isn't it. I mean
That I've learned she hasn't a penny in the world.
A: You've "learned"!—
Liar, liar, you're not in love!
The heart struck silly by Love's shaft
Forgets its arithmetic!

AGATHIAS

Dudley Fitts, Poems from the Greek Anthology
(In English Paraphrase)
New Directions, New York, 1956.

